

Environmentalists Continue To Damn Snake River Dams

Editorial

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We had no right to believe that when former President Bill Clinton said breaching the Snake River dams "is not going to happen," environmentalists would capitulate. It has been announced that four environmental organizations have financed a study they believe justifies removing the structures to aid salmon recovery.

American Rivers, the National Wildlife Federation, Idaho Rivers United, and the Idaho Wildlife Federation commissioned the study. Produced by BST Associates of Bothell, Wash., it concludes that replacing Snake River transportation with rail lines would cost less than previously estimated. It is believed by some that the study supports environmentalists' claims that the cost of building rail lines along the Snake River is less than ongoing operation and maintenance costs for the lower Snake River dams and less than ongoing salmon recovery costs, all borne by federal taxpayers.

The Greenwire environmental news service, reporting on the study, says the cost of replacing barges with rail transportation is estimated between \$44 million and \$420 million. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimated the cost in 2002 to be \$206 million to \$541 million.

The federal government spends \$36.5 million annually to operate and maintain the four lower Snake River dams. The Corps plans to spend \$390 million over the next 10 years to keep them operational. Federal salmon recovery efforts, Greenwire reports, run about \$500 million a year for 12 threatened and endangered runs of salmon and steelhead in the Columbia River Basin, including the four on the Snake.

American Rivers says the government "has failed for years to recover salmon with the four lower Snake River dams in place."

Switching from barge to rail transportation would require upgrading existing rail lines, purchasing more rail cars to carry grain, and other agricultural products and modifying grain elevators throughout the region, the study said.

Naturally the railroads are interested. The Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway Company is willing to spend millions of dollars to build a new shuttle station to accommodate 110-car trains. The railroad said it could make money shipping Washington wheat and barley for an estimated 25 cents a bushel. The current rate on the river is 24 cents a bushel, according to Glenn Vanselow, director of the Pacific Northwest Waterway Association (PNWA). The study estimates transportation costs to farmers would increase 3 to 7 cents per bushel, which, according to Vanselow, would be a "huge hit for some farmers."

International markets set grain prices. Even though many farmers have federal crop insurance to cover losses, that cost, too, would be borne by federal taxpayers.

The BST study cites a Washington Department of Transportation report that concluded upgrades to the state's short-line rail system would improve the rural economy in Southeast Washington. The Corps, however, says removing barge transportation would have significant negative impacts on the regional economy.

A September 2002 Rand Corporation report concluded that removing the dams would have little to no

impact on the regional economy. It maintains that replacing hydroelectric power with a combination of renewables, efficiency measures and natural gas would help stabilize volatile Western power markets and could even result in economic benefits for the region. Environmentalists also commissioned the Rand report.

That the cost for shipping grain would increase for farmers by 2.9 to 7.1 cents per bushel does not mesh with reality, says PNWA. Today, there is price competition between the two modes.

"We can ship grain by rail from Nampa, Idaho, or by barge from Lewiston," said Arvid Lyons, manager of the Lewis-Clark Terminal Association, a major grain shipper based in Lewiston, Idaho. "Both are the same distance from Portland. To ship by rail from Nampa costs twice as much as shipping by barge from Lewiston."

Without competition, rail rates are likely to increase even more, PNWA said.

If the existence of rail service would improve service so much, it would seem that farmers would be the ones calling for it.

PNWA says breaching dams is extreme and risky. Taking out the dams may do nothing for the fish and may even harm them. The Lower Snake River Feasibility Study EIS chose a non-breach alternative. Also, NOAA Fisheries (formerly NMFS) chose a non-breach approach in its 2000 biological opinion.

According to PNWA, the fish have been returning in record numbers over the past four years. Juvenile survival has increased dramatically to nearly double what it was in the 1970s. New measures, such as the removable spillway weir and fish-friendly turbines, continue to improve juvenile survival. Twenty-six Northwest fish runs are listed under the Endangered Species Act. Only four are on the Snake River. The decline in fish runs is far broader than the Snake River dams, says PNWA, and taking out the dams does nothing for the other 22 runs.

"So what is the emergency?" we ask.

Taking out the dams would cost more than \$1 billion and result in the loss of more than \$400 million in hydropower production every year forever, plus the cost of constructing new power plants. Breaching the dams also would eliminate irrigated agriculture around the Ice Harbor pool. And, we must add, barge transportation is more environmentally friendly and less fuel consuming. Shifting from barges would put hundreds of thousands of trucks on the highway, PNWA said.

PNWA says we shouldn't let misguided arguments of dam-breaching proponents interfere with the important work being done to rebuild fish runs and protect our environment while maintaining a vibrant Northwest economy.

Certainly the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe is willing to spend millions to turn grain transportation in the Pacific Northwest into a virtual monopoly. Railroads are very generous in supporting environmental organizations, because they are always anxious to get their hands on that proverbial brass ring-increased freight rates.

If PNWA is correct, the fish are doing fine and improving. As the association points out, "Dam breaching is not a silver bullet. The ocean, not the dams, may be the controlling factor." They should not be breached!